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# Discourse Analysis and Activist Social Work: Investigating Practice Processes

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*Although discourse analysis methods have been used for the critical analysis of activist practice theories, the application of these methods to practice processes has remained a largely uncharted territory. A chief aim of this paper is to demonstrate the possibilities discourse analysis offers for the investigation of activist practice processes. The paper introduces a discourse model which combines poststructural discourse principles and conversation analysis methods. The model is then applied to the study of the effects of activist perspectives for service users and workers within a context of activist practice in which one of the authors has been involved as a social worker. This analysis reveals the local interactions amongst workers and service users to be considerably more complex than has been allowed within activist practice discourses.*

## Introduction

In many fields of social science the idea that language is merely a vehicle for expression or a conduit for ideas has been challenged as it is increasingly seen that language actively constitutes identities, relationships, institutions and social practices (Burman and Parker, 1993, p. 7; Fairclough, 1992, p. 21; Rodger, 1991, p. 64; Weedon, 1987, p. 21). The contemporary interest in

language as a site for analysis and action, while not confined to postmodern and poststructural analyzes, can be largely attributed to the key assumptions of these theoretical "schools". In particular, poststructuralists refute the notion of essential realities, preferring the view that most meaning and much "reality" are made possible only through discourse (Weedon, 1987).

In this paper, we will demonstrate some ways in which discourse and conversation analysis methods can be applied to the study of activist practice processes and to the extension of activist practice theory. By practice theory we mean theory that seeks to explain practice, apply theory to practice, or develop theory from practice (Fook, 1996, p. xiv; Goldstein, 1990). We see as "activist" those models of practice that position the worker "alongside oppressed and impoverished populations" in the struggle for social justice (Leonard, 1994, p. 17; see also Fine, 1992, p. 220), and we consider that a range of feminist, radical, structural and action research models are consistent with this definition of activist practice. In our choice of analytic methods we do not attempt to build a unitary model of practice or to insist on one particular approach as appropriate to all practice. Rather we seek to demonstrate some of the possibilities that a choice of discourse analysis methods offer for highlighting the contingencies and complexities that are present within social work practice and we will do so through an example of activist practice.

### Discourse Analysis and Social Work Research

The non-use of language studies within the social sciences has been partly the result of the highly technical and obtuse character of much of the linguistic methodological literature (Fairclough, 1992), and partly due to the social science view that language is transparent. For example, in using interview data, there is a tendency to believe that the "social content of such data can be read off without attending to the language itself" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 2; see also Rojek et al. 1988, p. 118).

In addition, many activist practitioners and theorists share the view that language plays a marginal role in constructing social realities, especially in contrast to social superstructures such as capitalism and patriarchy. Very often, critical social analyzes

assume that local relations of power, identity and change can be deduced from these broad social structures. Discourse analysis challenges such claims. From a discourse analytic perspective, the local relations of practice are not seen as merely an effect of the structural. For example, a critical social analysis would suggest that the worker is more powerful than the service user, yet, within the practice context, the service user may be able to exercise certain forms of power to which the worker has little or no access. The service user may have access to certain forms of knowledge, such as "street-wise" knowledge, or experiences, such as the experience of early parenthood or drug-addiction, which may be highly valued by those within the practice context, even if this is not esteemed in the community more generally. The value placed on this "alternative" knowledge can be a resource for the exercise of some forms of power within the practice context. Hence, in order to grasp the nuances of power, identity and change that occur in practice, analysts must attend to the local actions of the interactants, that is the workers and the service users, rather than base their analysis primarily or solely in the analysis of social superstructures.

The increasing interest in poststructural theories within the social sciences has given credence to the deployment of discourse analysis methods for the study of social work practices and policies more generally. According to poststructuralists, discourses fix norms and truths and so shape what can be written, said and even thought within particular contexts (McHoul and Grace, 1991). This approach suggests that discourses have a material existence in that they do not simply construct ideas but also the "field of objects" through which the social world is experienced (Foucault, 1977, p. 199). This is not to claim that language produces experiences such as poverty or domestic violence, but that language fundamentally shapes these experiences in delimiting what can be said, shared, thought, and even felt about them.

According to Sands (1988), during the 1970s and early 1980s there was some application of discourse analysis to the critical study of practice processes such as labeling and cross-cultural communication (see Sotomayor, 1977). However, the use of discourse analysis methods to the study of actual practice has been largely confined to *clinical* social work processes (see Nye, 1994;

Sands, 1988). Over the past decade there has been recognition amongst social work theorists and researchers of the relevance of poststructural theories, particularly the use of discourse analytic approaches, to investigate a range of social welfare practices and policies (see Opie, 1993, 1995; White, 1996). Poststructuralism has also been employed to critically reflect upon the representations and emancipatory claims that underpin a range of activist practice models, radical, feminist and structural, (see Featherstone and Fawcett, 1994; Leonard, 1996; Rojek, Peacock and Collins, 1988). Within activist social work, discourse analysis methods have been used to highlight and critique the philosophical foundations of practice theories, including activist practice models (see Leonard, 1996; Rojek *et al.*, 1988). However, as yet the application of discourse analysis to the study of activist practice *processes* has remained largely uncharted territory. Indeed, it is ironic that despite the activist concern with “praxis”, the use of discourse analysis methods has been used mainly for exploring theory. An important purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the application of discourse analytic methods to the study of activist social work processes.

In considering the application of discourse analytic methods, we will outline two approaches to the study of language practices; that is, a poststructural approach to discourse analysis and conversation analysis. These analytic methods will then be applied to the study of power within a context of activist practice in which the first author was engaged.

### Discourse Analysis: An Overview

There are a number of methods—semiotic, sociolinguistic, and conversation analytic—that can be identified as discourse analysis. Despite their diversity, these approaches share the following premises:

- that language actively constitutes or constructs social realities;
- that both written and spoken discourse are the proper objects of analysis;
- that language should be studied in its use.

Briefly, discourse analysis involves the study of stretches of spoken or written communication within their real-life situation,

concentrating on the ways in which social functions are carried out through talk or writing (see Hudson, 1980). This focus on the relationship between the text and the social context differentiates discourse analysis methods from those of linguistics and phonetics, which concentrate on the properties of language largely divorced from their communicative contexts (Nunan, 1993, p. 7, but for an exception see Sperber & Wilson 1986).

Discourse analysis covers many different aspects of communication, for example, the differences in patterns of talk between cultures and groups, the different genres that exist and their principles, while at the finer levels, in conversation analysis, it assumes that all data in communicative talk are significant and worth study, however trivial or irrelevant they may seem. In our model of analysis, we combine the insights of a poststructural approach to discourse analysis with conversation analysis approaches. We will now outline these two approaches before demonstrating their application to the study of activist social work.

### Discourse Analysis: A Poststructural Approach

A basic premise of a poststructural approach is that discourses actively constitute social realities. As Fairclough (1992) asserts:

Discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct or "constitute" them; different discourses constitute key entities (be they "mental illness", "citizenship", or "literacy") in different ways, and position people in different ways as social subjects (e.g. as doctors or patients), and it is these social effects of discourse that are focused on in discourse analysis. (p. 3-4)

Discourse analysis is intended to grasp how certain thoughts, feelings and actions are made possible through discourse as well as those that are precluded. In social work research, this approach can be used to draw attention to the way in which key entities, such as identities, knowledge, power, and concepts such as "need," are constructed through the organizational and social work discourses operating within specific contexts of practice (Rodgers, 1991). Of particular value to the analysis of activist practice processes are the possibilities discourse analysis allows for showing how power, powerlessness, and empowerment are

actually embodied in real-life social interaction and how these processes are constructed, managed, attempted, resisted and refused. Discourse analysis potentially enriches activist social work practice by elucidating the complexities at the local levels of social work practice, particularly the extent to which the language practices adopted by workers and service users variously shape the practice context.

When applied to the study of actual interactions, discourse methods often require a finely detailed account of language practices. A fundamental analytic requirement, then, is for access to the spoken or written text. The analysis of practice processes, requires at a minimum, audio recordings of the practice context. Discourse analysis requires that the transcription of these recordings includes not only the content but also the sound of the talk. Its incorporation of features such as voice pitch, vocal emphasis, timing and silences enhances "the interpretative possibilities" that are often excluded in social science research (Opie, 1995, p. 34).

### Conversation Analysis

In our discourse analysis study of activist social work, we also incorporated conversation analysis strategies. In comparison to poststructural approaches to discourse analysis which focus on how language practices make certain understandings and actions possible, conversation analysis is more concerned with the organization of talk. It is based on the assumption that the way in which talk is organized, such as how conversational turns are accessed by different speakers and the comparative length of conversational turns amongst speakers, reveal the participants' understanding of the social world. In social work research conversation analysis can provide a useful complement to discourse analytic approaches as it allows a fine detailed analysis of the conversational strategies utilized by both workers and service users to achieve and 'manage' the practice context.

A conversation analysis approach is characterized by a number of principles. Firstly, that communicative talk is a social action. In other words, people *do* things through their talk. For example, one person can criticize another or one can attend to another and this affects the forms of relationship that are possible. Secondly,

that communicative talk is organized and locally managed by its participants. Through their talk, individuals contribute to the construction and reproduction of specific interactional contexts. As Holstein and Gubrium (1994) describe spoken interaction:

members [i.e. participants] continuously rely upon the interpretive capacities of coparticipants in interaction to assemble and reveal a locally visible sense of order. Social structures are locally produced, sustained, and experienced as normal environments—that is, routine, taken-for-granted states of affairs. (p. 264–265)

This is not to suggest that individuals have equal power nor that they are entirely free to choose how they will interact; rather it means that the actions of individuals within local interactional contexts are vital to the ongoing achievement of those contexts.

A third principle of conversation analysis is that individuals achieve their sense of the social world not just by what they say but also by the way the talk interaction is managed. For example, power relations are exercised and managed in ways that are contextually specific. In some contexts it is those who are deemed to speak who exercise power, such as the university lecturer and the priest, while in other contexts, power is exercised by those who listen, such as the counselor. A fourth assumption is that there are general principles behind the organization of communicative talk and that these principles can be discovered. It is understood that through individual's speech actions they reflect their understanding of social realities, such as the nature of the local interaction and local relationships and, in so doing, contribute to the ongoing reproduction of those realities. For example, the kinds of conversation actions that characterize everyday casual conversation, vary markedly from the conversational rules tacitly adhered to in conversations between professionals and service users or between intimates. Conversation analysis, therefore attempts to analyze the very detailed "collaborative practices speakers use and rely upon when they engage in intelligible interaction" for in so doing they claim to reveal the processes through which social entities and social relationships are produced (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994, p. 265).

Conversation analysis studies the conversational cues and processes through which social actors reflect and are produced by their social context (Sands, 1989, p. 149). Conversational analysts



seek to identify the speech acts that occur, such as apologizing, interrupting and so forth; to note how these acts are organized, e.g. who interrupts, who remains silent; and to consider what effect these acts have within their specific contexts. This method allows the interrogation of the minutiae of conversational interaction; particularly the ways in which understandings about contexts and the nature of social relationships is expressed within these contexts. One way this method can be useful for social work practices is to consider the effects of activist practices processes on interactions within the practice context. Thus, one could analyze the extent to which the activist preference for egalitarian practice relations between workers and service users is reflected in the organization of talk in practice.

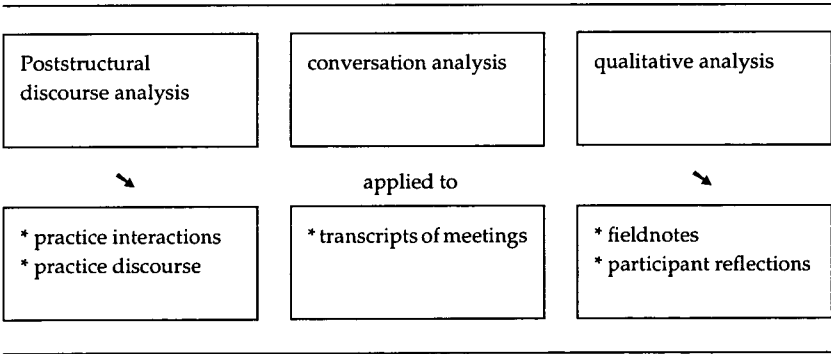
Conversation analysis shares with discourse analysis a key epistemological assumption, that the social world is achieved by human action rather than existing independently of it (Heritage and Atkinson, 1984). Like discourse analysis, the study of conversation involves the use of audio-tapes taken from the interactional setting under study, without editing, and including such details as hesitations, errors and pauses. The use of taped data allows for close and repeated observation of the social interactions and it also enhances the range and precision of observations that can be made (Heritage and Atkinson, 1984). Because of the degree of precision involved in the transcription and analysis of conversational tapes, the analysis is usually confined to small samples of conversation. Having outlined the features of discourse and conversation analysis, we will now demonstrate their application to the study of activist social work.

### Applying Discourse Analysis to Practice

The study was grounded in an activist social work project in which the first author was involved as a project worker. (To avoid confusion between the authors of this paper and the workers in practice, the latter will be referred to as "the workers"). The project drew on a number of activist practice models and perspectives, including participatory action research, critical and feminist perspectives. Through this project, a core group of adolescent mothers were involved in examining their own and other

young women’s experiences of violence, and in developing action strategies that addressed both the personal and social issues that contributed to young women’s experiences of violence (see Young Mothers for Young Women, 1995; Healy and Walsh, 1997). With the permission of the project participants, the worker collected data from the project meetings in order to analyze the operations of power, identity and change from within a context of activist practice. The data corpus consisted of audio-taped recordings from meetings; field notes; and participant reflections on the process taken over a twelve month period. These data were submitted to a three-level analysis process consisting of: poststructural discourse analysis methods; conversation analysis methods; and qualitative research analysis involving the identification and comparison key themes in the fieldnotes and participant reflections on the action research project. These methods were applied to the data corpus in varying ways as the table below demonstrates. The model below indicates the interaction between the methods:

Table 1  
*A Model of Analysis*



In the larger study overall, an analysis of power, identity and change within the practice context was undertaken (Healy, 1997). In this paper, we will limit our discussion to four aspects of the analysis; these are:

- the multiple effects, both liberating and constraining, of emancipatory discourses in practice;

- the tensions inherent in activist discourses between the radical egalitarian position and implicit demands for the use of worker power;
- the interactional processes that characterized the activist context, noting particularly how these differed from “everyday” conversation, despite the apparent informality of the practice context;
- how the workers enacted power, and how this use of power was both constituted and complicated by the egalitarian ethos that is central to many activist practice discourses.

### Studying Practice Discourses

In our discourse analytic research, we focussed on two levels of analysis. We investigated how activist practice discourses impacted on the participants, both the workers and service users, and upon the practice processes. One part of the discourse analysis study considered the effects, both intended and unintended, of emancipatory perspectives upon the young women who participated in the project. As one element of our study we considered the impact of the critical perspectives which were raised by both the facilitators and the participants on the young women’s interpretations of their personal experiences of violence. These critical discourses made visible the links between the structural contexts of the young women’s lives, such as the effects of poverty and sexism, and their personal vulnerability to violence. Some of the young women commented that these perspectives released them from a pervasive sense of self-blame and worthlessness. In asserting the importance of these views in working with and advocating for young women, one participant stated:

Ya know, like some of the issues that we’ve brought up, I think it’s just, UNBELIEVABLE, the links that you find with the community and the media that put so much pressure on us, ya know, if they [other young women] can just THINK ABOUT THAT, then they’re not gonna come down so HARD on themselves, and thinking that they’re a total failure in the world.

While the critical perspectives facilitated through the activist process made some aspects of the young women’s experiences visible, particularly the links between the political and the personal, there were other aspects that were marginalized through

these views. For instance, although highlighting the pervasiveness of male violence towards women, these perspectives also contributed to the sense, amongst some of the participants, that there was little room for discussing positive experiences with men. As one participant put it:

You have to take a stand somewhere, but everything, every little thing, in their lives is 'oh men are bastards,' ya know . . . I wanted to get up and say 'not all guys are bastards', [but] I would've been killed.

For this young woman, it seemed that the perspectives aimed at highlighting the pervasiveness of male violence towards women, actually led to the silencing of some of her experiences. To point to these constraining effects in this context is not to suggest that critical perspectives will have the same effect in every context or for all participants, nor, do we argue for the abandonment of these critical views. Rather, from a discourse analytic perspective it is necessary to consider the local and multiple effects of the discourses utilized within the local contexts of emancipatory social work. Discourse analysis assists activists to recognize what emancipatory discourses allow to be said and done as well as what they marginalize within specific contexts of practice.

A second way, we used discourse analysis was to investigate the elements of activist practice processes that are emphasized and as well as those that are constrained through activist practice discourses. One aspect of the research involved an analysis of the operations of worker power in practice. Applying discourse analysis methods, we sought to uncover how power was defined in activist discourses with a particular focus on the tensions and contradictions about worker power *within* activist discourses.

A discourse analysis of activist practice discourses revealed two contradictory views about power. On an explicit level, activist discourses represent worker power as coercive; that is, worker power is believed to have damaging and oppressive effects for service users. For example, it is asserted that the power of the worker is used to impose middle class values upon the service (see Calder, 1995) and to depower through silencing the indigenous knowledges and capacities of oppressed people (see Fals-Borda,

1987). Because of the coercive character of worker power, activist models frequently demand that power should be constantly given away rather than held or used by the worker. The transfer of power is to be achieved via the democratic sharing of knowledge, skills, and tasks at all stages of the practice process (Moreau, 1990, p. 56–57; Mullaly, 1993, p. 173–175). Despite the profound critique of worker power, a discourse analysis approach to activist practice discourses also reveals a tension between this explicitly negative view of power and the implicit demands within these practice models for workers to use power. For example, activist workers and researchers are routinely involved in initiating practice projects and processes (Alder and Sandor, 1989; Reason, 1994); promoting participant involvement and leadership (Song, 1992; Ward and Mullender, 1991); facilitating meetings (Mathrani, 1993); raising consciousness and promoting activist attitudes (Corrigan and Leonard, 1978; Dixon, 1993; Dominelli and McLeod, 1989; Finn, 1994; Maguire, 1987; Moreau, 1990); imparting technical information and skills (Sarri and Sarri, 1992); and even initiating the sharing of power itself (Finn, 1994; Thorpe, 1992). Thus, rather than a surrender of power, what activist practice models appear to demand is a *different* use of power from that usually associated with the elite and hierarchical models of practice.

Yet at the same time, the processes that activists employ in enacting this different use of power have been marginalized (or even silenced) in the activist canon because signs of difference, particularly differences in power, are associated with inequity and hierarchy (Healy, 1996; Phillips, 1991). This means that to acknowledge one's use of power in practice is to risk the charge that one's work is not activist after all. On the basis of an analysis of the tensions within the activist practice models, this study was aimed at testing the explicitly negative view of power and finding ways of excavating a number of hidden dimensions of power in activist practice, particularly, the productive character of worker power. We then turned to another method of language analysis, conversation analysis, in order to examine the specific operations of power within the activist social work project.

### Conversation Analysis of Practice

A superficial observation of the talk produced in the practice context would suggest that there was a high degree of equity between workers and participants, particularly in comparison with the hierarchical and distant relations often associated with traditional or orthodox practice. For example, the language used was informal in that there was little use of professional jargon, and considerable use of slang or casual words and phrases. This use of informality can be considered to approximate to the ideals typically promoted in activist social work practice discourses (Rodger, 1991, p. 66).

Yet, while the conversation that occurred amongst workers and service users within the practice context was certainly informal, a fine grained analysis of these interactions revealed significant differences from "natural" or "everyday" talk. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson identify a number of principles in the organization of everyday conversational turn-taking which, according to Fairclough (1992), can be summarized as:

- (i) the current speaker may select the next speaker;
- (ii) if not, the next speaker may 'self-select' by starting to produce a new turn;
- (iii) if not, the current speaker may continue" (p. 17).

Sacks *et al.* (1978) note that the "current speaker selects next" mode means that "the party so selected has rights, and is obliged, to take (the) next turn to speak, and no others have such rights or obligations" (p. 13). They also note that this is the preferred mode in many conversational contexts.

In contrast to "everyday" conversation where, according to Sacks *et al.* (1978), there is preference for the current speaker to select the next speaker, in the practice context, there was an extreme preference for self-selection, both by workers and participants, in the group's talk. This means that at each point where speaker transition could occur, individual participants would rapidly seize a conversational turn. This showed the participants' strong motivation to speak, which is further illustrated by the fact that when the current speaker did select the next speaker it was common that someone other than the selected speaker took

the speaking opportunity offered to another. This indicates both a strong competition for conversational turns, greater than that typically experienced in "everyday" conversation, and demonstrates a degree of empowerment amongst the participants in this specific context of practice insofar as they were able to actively shape the interactional process, and they did so from the outset of the project.

Despite the intense competition for speaking space, over the course of the project all participants managed to obtain numerous opportunities for extended conversational turns in which to tell and critically analyze their experiences, and managed to document a collective analysis of their experiences. The core group also began to implement action strategies in relation to their own and other young women's experiences of violence, such as through the establishment of a peer support and advocacy network for young women. However, the intense motivation of the participants to "self-select" contributed to a tension between the two goals often promoted within activist practice discourses: of privileging the participants' voices (which it did); and of creating opportunities (often silence) for critical reflection and action (which it did not).

Conversation analysis also showed the ways in which the turn-taking process highly constrained the two workers, while they could overtly regulate the practice context, for example, they could not easily 'select another to speak' because the obligations to talk which this set up could be seen as a contravention of the egalitarian ethic of activist practice discourses. Nonetheless, while the workers themselves were limited in their capacity to direct the process, conversation analysis was able to show that the process was still regulated and that this was done to some degree collectively. Conversation analysis also usefully revealed some of the relatively inconspicuous ways worker power was enacted to support the activities of the project group.

### Shaping the Process through Action-Reflection

An important way in which activist social workers may shape the practice context is through the introduction of action reflection cycles, as derived from the work of Freire (1972). Action-

reflection cycles have been integral to consciousness raising processes and have proven to be extremely popular in a range of activist practice models (see Dominelli and McLeod, 1989; Finn, 1994; Leonard, 1975). Through these cycles workers involve participants in identifying links between their personal experiences and their social context, particularly noting how their social and economic context has contributed to personal experiences of pain and marginalization. The action-reflection process also involves participants in the identification of action strategies which are aimed at the transformation of the circumstances that perpetuate their vulnerability. This process of critical reflection is intended to be empowering insofar as participants experience themselves as knowers and, potentially, as activists.

Conversation analysis was used to examine the effects of the action-reflection process on the organization of talk. Conversational samples were taken on six occasions (both from action-reflection cycles and other meetings) over the course of the project and their silence patterns were examined. Because the examination involved extreme attention to detail, where silences of up to a tenth of a second both within utterances and at the completion of them were examined, it was necessary to limit these samples to ten minutes each. The examination of the silence patterns confirmed the intense competition for conversational space in the non action-reflection cycles. For example, it was rare for participants to orient themselves to each other's talk and this lack of orientation was illustrated by speech actions such as, "dual" story-telling (that is a number of participants telling different stories simultaneously) and seizing brief pauses or gaps in talk as conversational opportunities. Where the workers implemented the action-reflection cycles, pauses *in talk* were at least triple those present at any other time and gaps *after talk* were at least double that present in other meetings throughout the entire project. These increases in silence during the action-reflection cycles were particularly supportive of reflection on individual experiences, since speakers did not need to compete with others for conversational space. and so could pause to collect their thoughts without such conversational breaks being seized by others as an opportunity to begin to tell their own stories or to divert the conversation away from the original speaker's talk. So, the review of silence patterns over the course of



the project also revealed that the workers' actions has a profound, though often implicit, effect on the interactional process.

Attention to the social actions involved in the conversational samples taken during the action-reflection cycles also confirms the participants' greater orientation to each others' talk, through, for example, listening attentively, referring back to the speaker's previous illustrations and this occurs more than at other times during the action-research process. One illustration of this is taken from a discussion about one young woman's experience of sexual abuse. (In the transcripts below some of the conversation analysis transcription conventions have been retained, these are: underlining indicates force of talk; ↑ ↑ depicts high pitch; > > indicates speed in talk; [ ] indicates overlap between speakers; ( ) indicates that the content of the talk was unclear.) For the purposes of demonstrating the specific analytic concern at hand, "pauses" are gaps of over 0.5 seconds and "extended pauses" as gaps over 2.0 seconds, while **commas** indicate pauses under 0.5 seconds. This excerpt begins with one participant, 'Brooke' (not her real name), discussing her continuing contact with the relative who had abused her.

- Brooke: I'm still forced to talk with 'im at my mother's ↑ house ↑, cause she rings 1  
him up [PAUSE] an, umm, cause he's married and 'es got a kid now, and 2  
I'm forced to get on the phone and talk to him, an he's still [PAUSE]you 3  
know, >he's thirty-five now or something>, and he's still on the phone, he 4  
get on the phone and goes "hi honey, how are you?" [PAUSE] and I just 5  
go "ohh hi", and he goes "ohh, y:ou know I had ta get married I couldn't 6  
wait for you forever" and sayin' all this sorta sleasy stuff to me on the 7  
phone now [PAUSE] but, >I can't say anything>, cause my mum's right 8  
behind me [EXTENDED PAUSE] 9
- Annette: has your mum got an extension? [PAUSE] 10
- Brooke: ahh yeh, 11
- Melissa: get her on the phone, 12
- Brooke: she doesn't wanna know she won't listen, she ( ) 13
- Phillipa: she doesn't [wanna know 14
- Sonia: she doesn't wanna] know, 15
- Brooke: ohh, she knows, she definitely knows, 16
- Phillipa: but she doesn't wanna acknowledge it. 17

In this excerpt there is considerable evidence of opportunities for pausing and of focusing on one participant's talk. The participants demonstrate their attention through relevant questioning and

suggesting helpful acts, (line 10, "has your mum got an extension?"; line 12, "get her on the phone") and through supporting Brooke's talk (lines 14 and 15, "she doesn't wanna know").

In the context of the intense motivation amongst the participants to seize conversational opportunities for themselves this orientation towards another's talk is quite remarkable and was assisted by worker's use of power to initiate the action-reflection cycles. However, the workers also effected a *transfer* of power, insofar as the hierarchical relations of power that are said to characterize orthodox social work settings are less evident; indeed in this excerpt a number of the participants themselves were involved in facilitating the telling and analysis of one another's experiences rather than acting only as speakers of their experience. In more orthodox social work contexts, the actions of questioning and support are often expressed only by the worker (see Sands, 1989). In this instance, conversation analysis challenges the perspective that power is an oppressive force towards a recognition of the complex operations of power in practice.

#### The Workers' Implicit and Explicit Encouragement of Participants' Talk

A further illustration of the ways in which the workers unobtrusively shaped the process in the activist context under study was through their implicit and explicit indicators of active attention to the participants' talk. One example of these implicit indicators of active listening is that of *continuers*, that is, those utterances such as "uh huh", "yeh" and so forth that indicate support for, and understanding of, another's talk (Nofsinger, 1991, p. 118).

An analysis of samples taken over the course of the project indicates that continuers were a common feature of the workers' talk in the practice context. Indeed, in four of the six samples continuers occupy half of one worker's conversational turns. Moreover, it would seem that her use of continuers was purposeful since she reduced her use of continuers where extended conversational turns would be inconsistent with the immediate tasks or goals of the group. For example, it is evident that in one sample she offered far fewer continuers than at any other time.

This sample was taken during a meeting organized with the participants for the purpose of planning a forum for women beyond the core group. In this instance extended conversational turns, particularly when used for the purpose of story-telling, appeared to be inconsistent with this aim. It is notable that these implicit continuers were less common in the second worker's speech and almost entirely absent in the participants' own talk. This may indicate that an important part of the first worker's power of giving encouragement to participants was enacted through inconspicuous means, such as the implicit encouragement of others' talk, rather than through the overt acts of power that are often the subject of activist practice theory.

A second way in which both workers encouraged the young women's participation throughout the process was through the expression of explicit statements of support. Within the intense competition for conversational space these expressions of support were often used to extend the participant's speaking space. As some participants came, over the course of the project, to express their speaking power in ways that appeared aggressive or domineering, the workers sometimes used explicit continuers to counter what seemed to be deliberate attempts to silence others. The following illustration is taken from a core group gathering which occurred following a public meeting held by the participants to inform interested community members and professionals about the action research project. Again, some basic conversation analytic conventions have been included; these are: ↑ ↑ for high pitch; underline to indicate force; **commas** represent brief pauses. The excerpt begins with one young woman's reflecting that she had felt inadequately prepared for the meeting:

Melissa:	I think I'd need to better prepared next time, I kept repeating	1
	myself all the time	2
Annette:	you were	3
Worker 2:	it was probably a good answer	4
Annette:	heheh sorry	5
Melissa:	heheh I know	6
Worker 1:	what did you ↑repeat?↑	7
Melissa:	oh I can't remember, I felt like I kept repeating myself so it	8
	sounded like a good answer, and I couldn't think of another one!	9
Group:	heheh	10

Annette:	stuck with one answer, through the whole question, <u>hahaha</u>	11
Melissa:	it worked heheh	12
Worker 2:	<u>well, you didn't Melissa</u> , you actually answered the question, you	13
	didn't leave, I think you kept making a point when people kept	14
	ignoring your answer	15
Melissa:	oh	16
Worker 2:	people would ask another question, which you'd really just	17
	answered and you brought it back to, like "no, <u>we've got nothing</u>	18
Melissa:	yes	19
Worker 2:	<u>in common</u> with you"	20
Worker 1:	yes that was, <u>great</u>	21

In this excerpt, like the previous one, both workers and participants are oriented towards one speaker's talk, seeking to allow her space to explore her actions and feelings. The task here is to affirm the voice of the young woman and to challenge the negative interpretation put on her talk by herself, in line 1: "I kept repeating myself all the way through," and by others, in line 11: "stuck with one answer through the whole question, hahaha." Worker 2 tries to reinterpret the young woman's view of her repeating as a strength, line 4: "it was probably a good answer" and later in line 14: "you kept making a point". Melissa seems to accept this interpretation, (lines 12, 16 and 19). The workers' active support, as demonstrated here, is consistent with activist social work principles in that such support may counter the silencing of the marginalized both within the immediate practice context and even beyond it. It is significant too that in affirming Melissa's voice, the workers do not overtly challenge the other participants' derision, making their contestation implicit through their support of Melissa. This suggests a sensitivity in using power to encourage one voice without overtly criticizing or constraining the voices of others. Again this use of power by the workers in the minutiae of practice appears consistent with the egalitarian ethos, since it is used for the purpose of affirmation and empowerment rather than to reinforce their own status or authority.

It is remarkable that, even as the young women increasingly took on organizational roles in the practice context, both continuers and overt support for others remained largely absent from their talk. It seemed that the kinds of support offered by the young women and by workers for participants' talk differed, though

each was important in assisting participants' to find individual and collective voices about their experiences.

### Review of the Analysis

We have focused on the application of discourse and conversation analysis methods to the study of the use of worker power in one context of activist practice. We have demonstrated that over the entire course of the activist practice process some differences and asymmetries in power between the workers and participants continued. Some of the key findings of our longitudinal study of worker power in this one site of activist practice include, firstly, that the talk produced in the activist process was not like ordinary conversation, in that one group of participants—in this instance, the social workers—needed to take responsibility for facilitating some dimensions of the process, particularly in managing the distribution of talk turns. Moreover, it was apparent that much of this power was enacted inconspicuously. Secondly, that during the project, and even during one meeting, the speaking opportunities could vary between periods of intense competition, and of orientation to others talk. In each situation the social workers played a different part in managing egalitarianism. The workers' ongoing role at the implicit level of practice should not be seen as a failure to achieve egalitarian practice relations, but rather as evidence of the marginalization within the activist practice discourses of the complexities that may be present at the local levels of practice. We do not suggest that analyzes of other practice contexts would always reveal similar asymmetries, but rather that a study of the minutiae of practice can reveal greater complexity in worker and participant roles than are suggested by activist practice discourses.

### Implications of the Discourse Analysis Model for Activist Social Work

So we are proposing that activist practice can gain from being studied through a combination of discourse and conversation analysis. We consider that the combination of these analytic strategies is useful for revealing the complexity and dynamism of activist practice processes. We acknowledge that the model

of analysis we propose fits uneasily with some of the key assumptions on which activist social work rests. Particularly the assumption that social superstructures such as capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism should be the primary site of analysis in understanding activist social work (see Cloward and Fox Piven, 1975; Dixon, 1993). A discourse analysis approach that is informed by poststructural theory challenges the structural/local dualism that has pervaded much of the activist practice theory. In such an approach "neither language nor social structure are monolithic; nor are they separate from one another" (Kingfisher, 1996, p. 559). In its focus on the local dynamism and complexities of practice, discourse analysis allows for an acknowledgement of practice as a *different* rather than *inferior* site of social work theorizing.

In addition, discourse analysis focuses on what activist practice "is" rather than what it should be. Discourse analysis demands that the analysis should begin in the practice settings, thus, allowing recognition of the contextual limits and possibilities for activism. In so doing, these methods draw attention to the often implicit and unacknowledged assumptions present in activist practice discourses about the kinds of contexts in which activists will work. Hence, for example, it is possible to recognize differences between emancipatory practices in the diverse settings in which social workers practice occurs (see Healy, in press). By providing tools for exposing the implicit assumptions of activist discourse, these methods yield possibilities for deconstructing and diversifying what it means to be an activist practitioner. This does not mean that activists should abandon, altogether, the utopian visions that have provided a powerful motivation for activist practice; but rather that these visions should be grounded in the specificities of practice.

While the kind of analytic methods we propose have a number of advantages for activist social work, they also have some limitations, which we will briefly outline. Firstly, they are highly technical so they are time consuming to learn and to apply. This can severely limit their accessibility to activist social work practitioners who, in many instances, are highly constrained in the amount of time they can devote to research activity.

Secondly, a typical characteristic of discourse and conversation analysis is that they require an "elaborate analysis of rela-

tively small samples of language" (Nunan, 1993, p. 86; see also Fairclough, 1992). The focus on detail and the requirements of accurate transcription can limit the breadth of practice processes that can be studied. The fine detailed character of discourse analytic research can reduce its appeal to funding bodies which are often more interested in macro analysis rather than detailed social research on the local interactions of practice. These methods may also raise concerns for social work researchers who are concerned with grasping the breadth as well as the depth of practice processes. In our own research we have dealt with the problems created by the emphasis on detail by collecting a set of conversation samples at intervals during the practice process, so that they could be compared and contrasted. Another way to deal with this is to be quite pragmatic about which analytic aspects to concentrate on. In our own use of analytic methods we concentrated on three of the aspects of the talk: speaker selection, silence, and supportive aspects of talk. This is not to suggest that we were not rigorous, but rather that we made a selection of appropriate focuses for our social work goals. A further issue is that language analysis accounts are limited in the extent to which they can incorporate gesture and bodily activity. A final and important issue for activists is that while the analytic methods we have outlined allow for considerable focus on the local, the contextual and the complex, they do run the risk of ignoring the broader political processes. This tension between the local and the socio-economic context is something which must be constantly addressed in all social work research and particularly in activist research.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the relevance of discourse methods to the study of activist social work practice processes and the extension of practice theory. We have proposed a model that combines a poststructural approach to discourse analysis with conversation analysis. The strength of conversation analysis is that it attends to the complexities and contingencies in the local organization of activist practice contexts that have remained hidden beneath the social structural explanations on which most activists have relied. At the same time, discourse analysis can be

used to study the social context in which the detail of practice occurs and to the ways in which particular social entities and relations emerge. We acknowledge that there are a wide range of other analytic methods that have application to social work practice analysis. While we recognize the limitations of discourse methods, we would argue that these methods provide powerful tools for engaging with the local complexities and contingencies of practice. The approach to discourse study we suggest, then, is not one aimed at uncovering the "truth" about practice, but rather is one which recognizes the "conditional, changeable character of social work" (Rojek et al., 1988, p. 131).

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